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# AN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY ESSAYIST ON POETRY AND MUSIC

By W. H. GRATTAN FLOOD

**I**N the year 1778 there was published at Edinburgh a remarkable volume by James Beattie, LL.D., Professor of Moral Philosophy and Logic in the Marischal College and University of Aberdeen, entitled: "Essays on Poetry and Music, as they affect the mind; on Laughter and Ludicrous Composition; on the Utility of Classical Learning." I have no intention of dealing with the two latter sections, but I think that a summary of the essays on Poetry and Music may prove of interest to twentieth-century readers. First, however, it may well be to give a brief sketch of the life of Dr. Beattie, whose writings once had a considerable vogue.

James Beattie was born at Lawrencekirk, a village in Kincardine (Scotland), on October 25th, 1735, and, after the usual primary education at the village school, entered Marischal College, Aberdeen, in 1749, obtaining a valuable scholarship. In 1753 he was appointed schoolmaster of the parish school of Fordoun at the foot of the Grampians, where he formed the acquaintance of Lord Monboddo. Three years later he was elected to the Ushership of Aberdeen Grammar School, and, in 1760, he was appointed Professor of Moral Philosophy and Logic in Marischal College. Between the years 1760 and 1770 he published several essays and some poems, including the "Essay on Truth" and the "Minstrel," followed by "Essays on Poetry and Music" in 1778. In 1773 he obtained a pension of £200, and the University of Oxford granted him the honorary degree of LL.D. From 1790 to 1799 he was in a most precarious state of health, and he died on August 18th, 1803.

Prefixed to the "Essays on Poetry and Music" is a note by Dr. Beattie, in which he informs the public that they were written in the year 1762, and were read at a private literary society. Having been examined in manuscript by "some learned persons in England," the author, at the desire of the said learned persons, revised the Essays, and published them in 1778.

The first five chapters deal solely with Poetry and are therefore outside the scope of the present article. Chapter the Sixth

is devoted to Music, and is divided into three Sections, which we shall take *seriatim*.

In Section I an enquiry is made: "Is Music an Imitative Art?" Section II is devoted to a consideration of "How are the pleasures we derive from Music to be accounted for?" Section III. is concerned with "Conjectures on some peculiarities of National Music."

After a preamble on the subject of Imitation as a plentiful source of pleasure, and of the high estimation in every enlightened age of "the imitative arts of poetry and painting, Dr. Beattie proceeds to the examination of Music as an Imitative art:

Shall I say that some melodies please, because they imitate Nature, and that others, which do not imitate Nature, are therefore displeasing?—that an air expressive of devotion, for example, is agreeable, because it presents us with an imitation of those sounds by which devotion does naturally express itself? Such an affirmation would hardly pass upon the reader, notwithstanding the plausibility it might seem to derive from that strict analogy which all the fine arts are supposed to bear to one another. He would ask, What is the natural sound of devotion? Where is it to be heard? What resemblance is there between Handel's *Te Deum* and the tone of voice natural to a person expressing, by articulate sound, his veneration of the Divine Character and Providence?—In fact, I apprehend, that critics have erred a little in their determinations upon this subject, from an opinion that Music, Painting, and Poetry are all imitative arts. I hope at least I may say, without offence, that while this was my opinion, I was always conscious of some unaccountable confusion of thought, whenever I attempted to explain it in the way of detail to others.

But while I thus insinuate, that Music is not an imitative art, I mean no disrespect to Aristotle, who seems in the beginning of his *Poetics* to declare the contrary. It is not the whole, but the *greater part* of music, which that philosopher calls Imitative; and I agree with him so far as to allow this property to some music, though not to all. But he speaks of the *ancient* music, and I of the *modern*; and to one who considers how very little we know of the former, it will not appear a contradiction to say, that the one might have been imitative, though the other is not.

Nor do I mean any disrespect to music, when I would strike it off the list of imitative arts. And, I am satisfied that, though musical genius may subsist without poetical taste, and poetical genius without musical taste; yet, these two talents united might accomplish nobler effects, than either could do singly. I acknowledge, too, that the principles and essential rules of this art are as really founded in nature, as those of poetry and painting. But when I am asked, what part of nature is imitated in Handel's *Water-Music*, for instance, or in Corelli's *Eighth Concerto*, or in any particular English song or Scotch tune, I find I can give no definite answer.

But between imitation in music and imitation in painting there is this one essential difference:—a bad picture is always a bad imitation

of nature, and a good picture is necessarily a good imitation; but music may be exactly imitative, and yet intolerably bad; or not at all imitative, and yet perfectly good. I have heard that the *Pastorale*—in the eighth of Corelli's Concertos (which appears by the inscription to have been composed for the night of the Nativity) was intended for an imitation of the song of angels hovering above the fields of Bethlehem, and gradually soaring up to heaven. The music, however, is not such as would of itself convey this idea; and even with the help of the commentary, it requires a lively fancy to connect the various movements and melodies of the piece with the motions and evolutions of the heavenly host. It is not clear that the author intended any imitation; and whether he did or not, is a matter of no consequence; for the music will continue to please, when the tradition is no more remembered.

Sounds in themselves can imitate nothing directly but sounds, nor in their motions any thing but motions. But the natural sounds and motions that music is allowed to imitate are but few. . . . Now, all the affections, over which music has any power, are of the agreeable kind. And, therefore, in this art, no imitations of natural sound or motions but such as tend to inspire agreeable affections, ought ever to find a place. The song of certain birds, the murmur of a stream, the shouts of multitudes, the tumult of a storm, the roar of thunder, or a chime of bells, are sounds connected with agreeable or sublime affections, and reconcileable both with melody and harmony; and may therefore be imitated, when the artist has occasion for them: but the crowing of cocks, the barking of dogs, the mewing of cats, the grunting of swine, the gabbling of geese, the cackling of a hen, the braying of an ass, the creaking of a saw, or the rumbling of a cartwheel, would render the best music ridiculous. The movement of a dance may be imitated, or the stately pace of an embattled legion; but the hobble of a trotting horse would be intolerable.

There is another sort of imitation by sound, which ought never to be heard, or seen, in music. To express the local elevation of objects by what we call *high* notes, and their depression by *low* notes, has no more propriety in it than any other pun. We call notes *high* or *low*, with respect of their situation in the written scale. There would have been no absurdity in expressing the highest notes by characters placed at the bottom of the scale or musical line, and the lowest notes by characters placed at the top of it, if custom or accident had so determined. And there is reason to think that something like this actually obtained in the musical scale of the ancients. At least it is probable that the deepest or gravest sound was called *Summa* by the Romans, and the shrillest or acutest *Ima*; which might be owing to the construction of their instruments. Yet some people would think a song faulty, if the word *heaven* was set to what we call a low note, or the word *hell* to what we call a high one.

All these sorts of illicit imitations have been practised, and by those, too, from whom better things were expected. This abuse of a noble art did not escape the satire of Swift; who, though deaf to the charms of music, was not blind to the absurdity of musicians. He recommended it to Dr. Echlin, an ingenious gentleman of Ireland, to compose a *Cantata* in ridicule of this puerile mimicry. Here we have

*motions* imitated, which are the most inharmonious, and the least connected with human affections—as the *trotting*, *ambling*, and *galloping* of Pegasus: and sounds the most unmusical, as *crackling* and *sniveling*, and *rough roystering rustic roaring strains*: the words *high* and *deep* have high and deep notes set to them; a series of short notes of equal lengths are introduced, to imitate *shivering* and *shaking*; an irregular rant of quick sounds, to express *rambling*; a sudden rise of the voice, from a low to a high pitch, to denote *flying above the sky*; a ridiculous run of chromatic divisions on the words *Celia dies*; with other droll contrivances of a like nature. In a word, Swift's Cantata alone may convince any person, that music uniformly imitative would be ridiculous. I just observe in passing, that the satire of this piece is levelled, not at absurd imitation only, but also at some other musical improprieties, such as the idle repetition of the same words, the running of long, extravagant divisions upon one syllable, and the setting of words to music that have no meaning.

Dr. Beattie unfortunately does not give his readers the musical setting of Swift's *Cantata*, which he describes so graphically, and therefore I am glad to be able to reproduce here the vocal score which is to be found in George Faulkner's edition of Swift, and in Scott's edition (VOL. XIX), and which is also known as "In harmony would you excel," from the opening lines of the satirical cantata.

Dr. Beattie goes on to suggest that no imitation should ever be introduced into purely instrumental music—whether into a *Concerto*, or into an instrumental *Solo*. However, as regards the latter, that is *Solos*, he adds:—

If they be contrived only to show the dexterity of the performer, imitations, and all possible varieties of sound, may be thrown in *ad libitum*; but to such fiddling or fingering I would no more give the honourable name of Music, than I would apply that of Poetry to Pope's "Fluttering spread thy purple pinions" or to Swift's "Ode on Ditton and Whiston."

Here I take the opportunity of pointing out a slip by Dr. Beattie in ascribing "Fluttering spread thy purple pinions" to Pope. This song was written by Dean Swift in 1733, and was entitled "A Love Song: in the modern taste," a lyric of eight stanzas. Present-day readers may care to see Swift's satirical song, and, therefore, I subjoin the first verse with the music by a nameless composer, as published in 1733.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>A year later, circa 1734, a different setting was published by Mr. Butler; a third setting—totally different from either—by J. Alcock, Organist of Newark-on-Trent, appeared in the *Universal Museum* for July, 1764, while a fourth effort—to music adopted from A. Scarlatti—was printed in Exshaw's Magazine for 1785.

# A Cantata

slow.

In harmony would

fast.

you ex.cell, Suit your words to your music well, mu sic well,

mu sic well, Suit your words to your mu sic well, Suit your

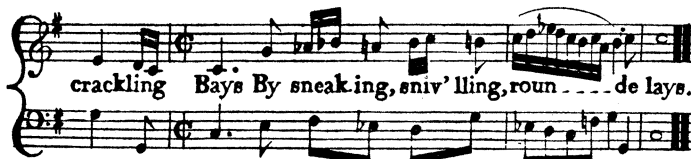
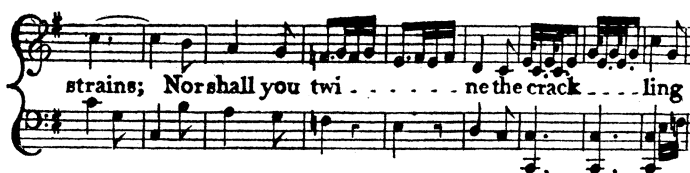
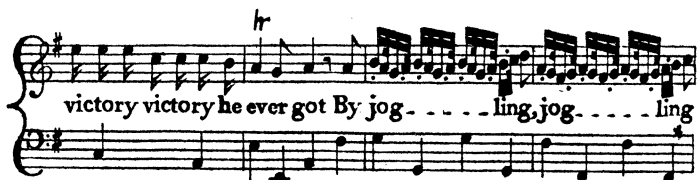
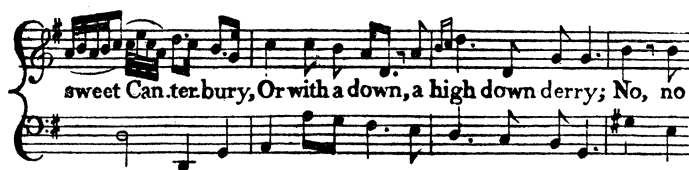
slow.

words to your mu sic well. For Pe ga sus

run s, run s, every race By gal

slow.

loping high or le vel pace Or amb ling or



Now slowly move your fiddlestick; Now tantan tantan tantan tivi

Now tantan tantan tantan tivi *fast* quick ♯ . . . ♯ quick; Now tremb. .

ling, shiv . . . ring, quiv . . . ring, quak . . . ing, Set

hoping, hoping, hoping hearts of lovers akeing. Fly, fly,

Above above the sky, Ramb . ling gamb . . ling, Ramb . . .

ling gambling,



Trolloping lolloping galloping trolloping Lolloping gallóping

trollop. Lolloping trolloping galloping lolloping. Trollop. ing

galloping lollop. Now creep sweep. Sweep sweep the deep

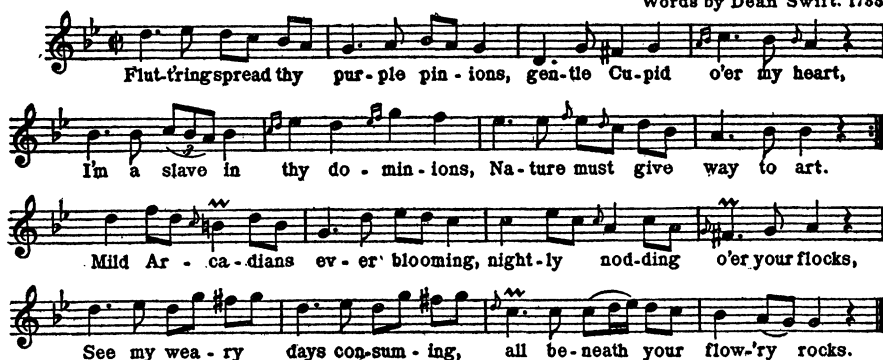
See see Celia Ce... lia dies dies dies dies dies dies dies dies

While true lovers eyes Weeping sleep Sleeping weep Weeping sleep

Bo peep. bo peep. bo peep. bo peep peep. bo bo peep.

### A Love Song

Words by Dean Swift. 1733



Dr. Beattie admits the legitimate use of imitations in Vocal Music, but he suggests that these must be confined “to the instrumental accompaniment, and by no means attempted by the singer, unless they are expressive and musical, and may be easily managed by the voice.” In the song, he adds, “Expression should be predominant, and imitations never used at all, except to assist the expression.” He then gives some examples:

In the first part of that excellent song:

“Hide me from day’s garish eye,  
While the bee with honey’d thigh,  
At her flowery work does sing,  
And the waters murmuring,  
With such concert as they keep,  
Intice the dewy feather’d sleep.”

Handel imitates the murmur of groves and waters by the accompaniment of *tenors*: in another song of the same Oratorio,

“On a plot of rising ground,  
I hear the far-off curfew sound,  
Over some wide-water’d shore,  
Swinging slow with sullen roar.”

he makes the bass imitate the evening bell: in another fine song, “Hush, ye pretty warbling choir”—he accompanies the voice with a flageolet that imitates the singing of birds: in the “Sweet bird that shun’st the noise of folly,” the chief accompaniment is a German flute imitating occasionally the notes of the nightingale. Sometimes, where expression and imitation happen to coincide, and the latter is easily managed by the voice, he makes the song itself imitative. Thus, in that song

"Let the merry bells ring round,  
And the jocund rebecks sound,  
To many a youth and many a maid,  
Dancing in the chequer'd shade"—

he makes the voice imitate the *sound* of a chime of bells, and in the end the *motion* and gaiety of a dance.

Of these imitations no one will question the propriety. But Handel, notwithstanding his inexhaustible invention, and wonderful talents in the sublime and pathetic, is subject to fits of trifling, and frequently errs in the application of his imitative contrivances. In that song,

"What passion cannot music raise and quell,"

when he comes to the words

"His listening brethren stood around,  
And wondering on their faces fell,"

the accompanying violoncello *falls* suddenly from a quick and *high* movement to a very *deep* and long note. In another song of the same piece (Dryden's *Ode on St. Cecilia's Day*),

"Sharp violins proclaim  
Their jealous pangs and desperation,  
Fury, frantic indignation,  
*Depth* of pains and *height* of passion,  
For the fair, disdainful dame;"—

the words "*Depth* of pains and *height* of passion," are thrice repeated to different keys; and the notes of the first clause are constantly *deep*, and those of the second as regularly *high*.

Dr. Beattie concludes Section I as follows:

Music, therefore, is pleasing, not because it is imitative, but because certain melodies and harmonies have an *aptitude* to raise certain passions, affections, and sentiments in the soul. And, consequently, the pleasures we derive from melody and harmony are seldom or never resolvable into that delight which the human mind receives from the imitation of nature.

In Section II we are given an explanation of the pleasures we derive from music. Dr. Beattie accounts for the pleasure by examining into the *aptitude* which certain melodies and harmonies possess, to raise certain passions, affections, and sentiments. He discusses the difference between a sense of hearing and the possession of a *musical ear*; and he also discusses *concord*s and *discord*s.

A very interesting point is made in regard to musical association of ideas.

Thus, a Scotchman may fancy that there is some sort of likeness between that charming air which he calls "Tweedside" and the scenery of a fine pastoral country: and to the same air, even when only played

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on an instrument, he may annex the ideas of romantic love and rural tranquillity; because these form the subject of a pretty little ode which he has often heard sung to that air. But all this is the effect of habit. A foreigner who hears that tune for the first time entertains no such fancy.

It may be remarked that association contributes greatly to heighten the agreeable effect of musical compositions. . . . In childhood every tune is delightful to a musical ear; in our advanced years, an indifferent tune will please, when set off by the amiable qualities of the performer, or by any other agreeable circumstance. During the last war (1761) the "Belleisle March" was long a general favourite. It filled the mind of our people with magnificent ideas of armies, and conquest, and military splendor; for they believed it to be the tune that was played by the French garrison when it marched out with honours of war, and surrendered that fortress to the British troops.

Here let me point out that the "Belleisle March" was composed in 1762, after the receipt of the news of the capture of Belleisle by Augustus Viscount Keppel, and was published in the *Universal Magazine* for 1763. By a regimental order of June 24th, 1768, the band of the Grenadier Guards was ordered to play this March as the official Quick March of the regiment.<sup>1</sup>

The concluding section of Dr. Beattie's Essay is concerned with "Conjectures on some peculiarities of National Music." He points out that there is a certain style of melody peculiar to each country, which the people of that country are apt to prefer to any other style; and he instances Scotland as a striking example, in which the native melody of the Highlands and Western Isles is as different from that of the southern part of the kingdom as the Irish or Erse language is different from the English or Scotch.

The Highlands of Scotland are a picturesque, but in general a melancholy country. Long tracts of mountainous desert, covered with dark heath, are often obscured by misty weather; narrow valleys, rugged soil, dreary climate; the mournful dashing of waves along the friths and lakes that intersect the country. . . . objects like these diffuse a gloom over the fancy, which may be compatible enough with occasional and social merriment, but cannot fail to tincture the thoughts of a nation in the hour of silence and solitude.

Dr. Beattie then proceeds to discuss the Scotch superstition of "Second Sight," and he concludes that from such "a fanciful tribe" one could only expect music of a wild, warlike, irregular type.

<sup>1</sup>The "Belleisle March" has been frequently ascribed to James Oswald, but in one of his own publications, *penes me*, he does not claim it, although he is notorious for his "acquisitive" habits.

On the other hand, it is argued by Dr. Beattie that the physical conformation of the south of Scotland, and its known qualities of pasture lands, "renders the inhabitants favourable to romantic leisure and tender passions." He instances a number of old Scottish songs, which take their names from the rivulets, villages, and hills, adjoining the Tweed near Melrose, as "sweetly and powerfully expressive of love and tenderness and other emotions suited to the tranquillity of pastoral life." These songs include "Cowdenknows," "Galasheils," "Gala Water," "Ettrick Banks," "Braes of Yarrow," "Bush aboon Traquair," etc.

It is a common opinion that these songs were composed by David Rizzio, a musician from Italy, the unfortunate favourite of a very unfortunate Queen. But this must be a mistake. The style of the Scotch music was fixed before his time; for many of the best of these tunes are ascribed by tradition to a more remote period. And it is not to be supposed that he, a foreigner, and in the latter part of his life a man of business, could have acquired or invented a style of musical composition so different in every respect from that to which he had been accustomed in his own country. *Melody* is so much the characteristic of the Scotch tunes, that I doubt whether even basses were set to them before the present (18th) century; whereas, in the days of Rizzio, *Harmony* was the fashionable study of the Italian composers.

Dr. Beattie finishes his essay with a eulogy on Italian music, and he adds that the beautiful language of Italy is a contributory cause to its "unequalled excellence." His view of Rizzio is quite correct; that worthy man, who came to Scotland in 1565, was only five years in the country. The myth of Rizzio as the founder of Scotch music originated with "Orpheus Caledonius," in 1725, and was backed up by James Oswald (1742) and Francis Peacock (1762). Scotch writers aver that the first to expose the myth was Clark in his "Flores Musicae" in 1773, but Dr. Beattie can claim the credit of so doing in the present Essay, which, though not published till 1778, was written in 1762.